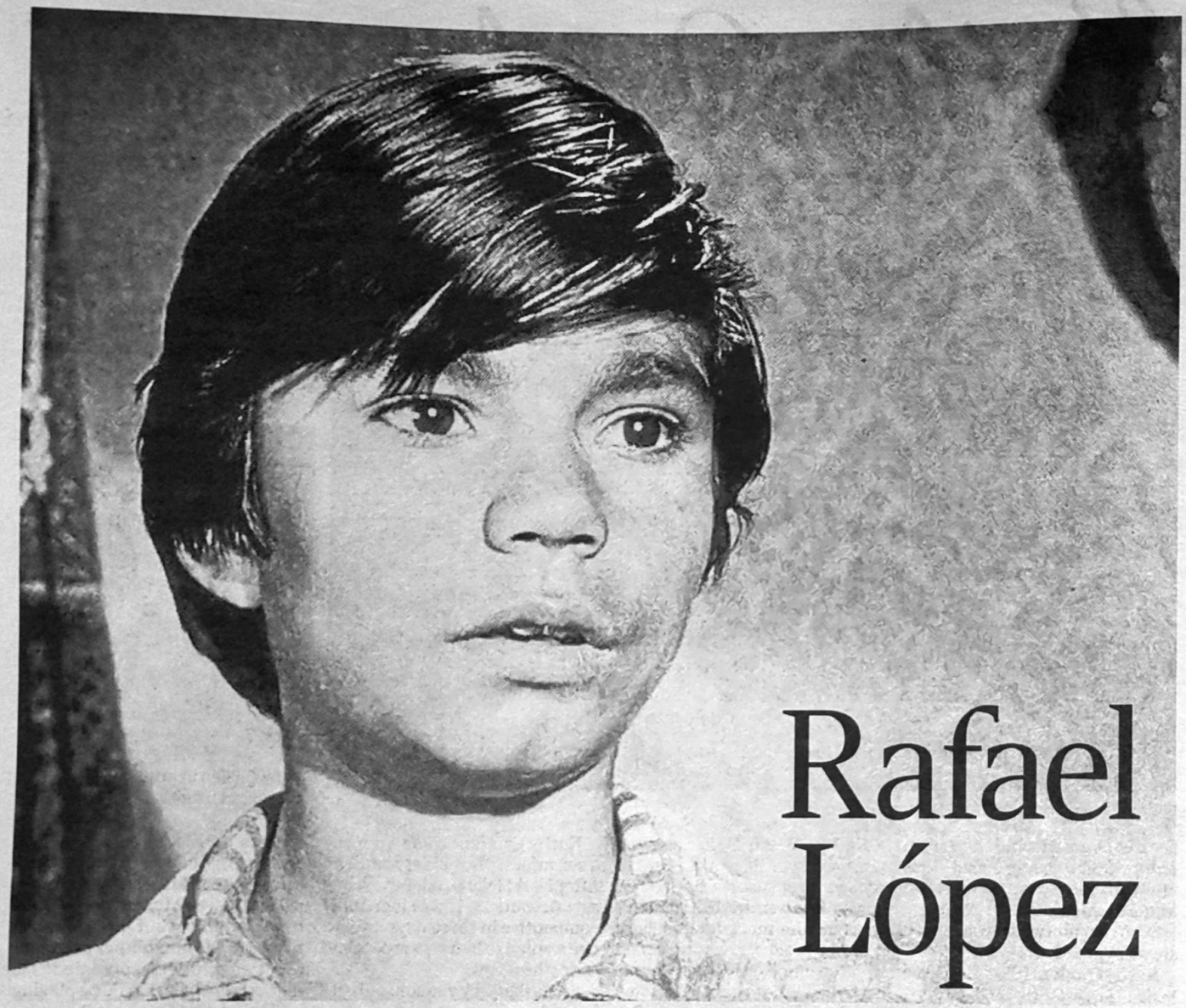


Rafael López

Q&A

SAMUEL CLAESSON

Rafael Gritzewsky is a very talented actor who did several wide-release movies such as *The Young Savages* (1961), *Dime with a Halo* (1963), and *The Reward* (1965). While attending Franklin High School, where he was an outstanding student, he was seen in westerns like *Bonanza*, *The Loner*, and *Death Valley Days*. His career temporarily stalled when he was drafted during the Vietnam War. He later enrolled at college, pursuing a degree, until accepting a position with a prominent advertising agency in Illinois. After several successes, he started his own firm and ran some advertising campaigns for Budweiser, Pepsi, and McDonald's. In addition to acting, he enjoys gardening and traveling. When he isn't guest-starring on a primetime television series, he travels the country in an RV seeing various landmarks and campgrounds.

Samuel Clemens: When did you first decide to pursue acting?

Rafael López: When I was five years old, I did an act with a magician my mother was dating. The act was Follies of Mexico. Eventually, my mother dated a man who brought us to Hollywood. This was in 1957, I think. After we got settled, my mother listened to the radio where she heard an advertisement asking for children with talent. She said that if I got hired for something that she'd buy me a bicycle. We went to the event where I recited a story that my mother wrote. An agent named Carlos, who represented practically every Mexican-American actor in Hollywood, asked to represent me. He was my agent for years, and he was good. Within two weeks, he put me on *The Millionaire* with Marvin Miller which got me into the Screen Actors Guild. He had me change my surname to López so it would align with the roles I was playing.

SC: Do you recall your role in an episode of *Lassie*?

Rafael López: The entire episode was focused on me, or my character who was an undocumented immigrant. My mother asked the director [William Beaudine] if I could wear a hat in the episode because she thought that it would be a good trademark so audiences could recognize me. I thought it was ridiculous, but I did it for her. She also requested that I carry a guitar, which was silly because someone who is crossing the border probably wouldn't carry a guitar with them. The director seemed to think it was a good idea, though.

SC: Was there ever a role that you were offered, but didn't do?

Rafael López: Before my breakthrough role in *The Young Savages*, I was offered a starring role in *The Beachcomber* with Cameron Mitchell. They even flew me to Hawaii to coerce me into doing it. Apparently, Cameron fought with someone in the crew and they canceled the project to avoid bad publicity. My agent gave me the news and I was disappointed. I later found out that they did proceed with *The Beachcomber*, but it was an entirely different concept with different characters. I later did a pilot for a war-themed sitcom that was basically a copycat of *M*A*S*H*. It was supposed to star Richard Crenna. I had the role of Corporal Lopez. It didn't sell, probably because of its similarities to *M*A*S*H*.

SC: How about a role that you pursued, but didn't get?

Rafael López: I was considered, or so I thought, for Chico Rodriguez on *Chico and the Man*. It turned out that they wanted Freddie Prinze before they even started this nationwide talent search that I felt was more for publicity. I knew the director because we worked on an episode of *Room 222* together. I thought I'd actually get the gig. In hindsight, he was a better fit as Chico since he was from New York City. I spent a lot of my life in Los Angeles, but the character of Chico was a stereotypically New Yorker.

SC: *Dime with a Halo* with Barbara Luna and Roger Mobley is one of your best films. What did you think of the entire experience?

Rafael López: I got a lot of support from the director [Boris Sagal] when we filmed. He knew

how he wanted my character to be played. He would talk with me before my scenes about what my character should be thinking and how he should be feeling. I was fortunate to have his help because it was a complex character of a boy who was determined, but very naive.

SC: It wasn't a box-office success, but it was praised by critics. How did it affect your career?

Rafael López: It was great getting top-billing, and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer was impressed with my performance. They offered me what was known as a sweetheart deal. They would guarantee me three films per year and a cottage on the lot, as well as loan me to Universal Studios to do another film that they wanted me for. That plan ended when I was drafted in the Vietnam War.

SC: Can you tell us about your service?

Rafael López: I was initially stationed in Germany, and later Texas where I married my wife, Rosemary. I was later sent to Vietnam before returning and being awarded a Bronze Star by Richard Nixon. It did stall my career, but I was happy to serve my country. I get great health benefits, as well, that have been instrumental over the years.

SC: When did you return to acting?

Rafael López: After the war ended, I was a lot thinner and had some PTSD. I was able to cope with the trauma of Vietnam by imagining I was starring in a war-themed film. My agent told me to take six months to recuperate, but it took a year before I started auditioning again.

SC: Your last film was *Kill the Golden Goose* (1979). What did you do afterwards?

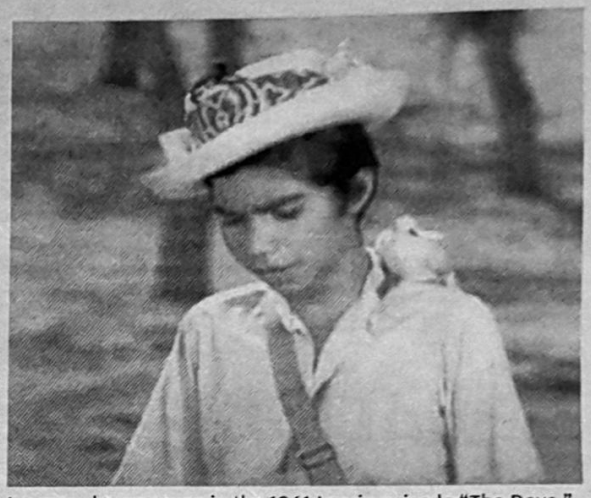
Rafael López: I wanted to earn a Bachelor of Arts, so I enrolled at Columbia College. I had finished a year when someone asked me to consult for a commercial with Schlitz beer. They wanted to reach out to Hispanics, so they flew me to Chicago to see the commercial, and I didn't like it. It portrayed Hispanics in an overly stereotypical and dated way. I did a storyboard of a commercial that would be more appealing, and it was a huge success. I started my own agency, Gritz Advertising, where I wrote and directed commercials for businesses in California. I did that until my mother became ill, and I returned to California to care for her.

As Chuy Perez, selling cheap imitation knockoff watches in Dime with a Halo (1963).

Shelley Winters and Rafael López in The Young Savages (1961).

SC: What are you doing now?

Rafael López: I divide my days between travel and acting. I get a lot of work as an extra in series like *NCIS: Los Angeles, The Whole Truth, True Detective, Castle, Boss*, and *Luck*. I have friends in the industry who are surprised that I accept these roles. I tell them, "I get paid either way." I feel blessed that I still get work at my age while traveling the country. There are certain things in my career that I wish I would've done differently, but I can't complain.



Lopez as he was seen in the 1961 Lassie episode "The Dove." His mother requested that he wear this distinctive hat.

Lopez, Ed Wynn and Clint Eastwood on a Rawhide episode, "Twenty-Five Santa Clauses" (1961).

The kids in Dime with a Halo (1963) with Rafael (seated), Manuel Padilla (center) and Roger Mobley (white shirt).